Which is the best list of the best colleges?

By Steve Thorngate
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A couple weeks ago, President Obama introduced a plan to try to contain the cost of going to college. This was soon buried by a series of stories on Syria policy, with its high-intrigue mix of exceptionalist saber-rattling and Mr. Magoo diplomacy.

So in case you missed it, the administration's higher-ed plan has some good stuff in it. Dylan Matthews runs down the old, the new and the yet-undone. Perhaps the single biggest proposal here is a new set of college rankings—rankings based on how well schools are serving students.

College rankings are a thing every September, and they're becoming more of one. PayScale ranks schools based on graduate salaries; math-and-science heavyweight Harvey Mudd College is their top performer.

Shikha Dalmia highlights a college ranking system that isn't: one that primarily measures *learning,* by way of the Collegiate Learning Assessment or some similar metric. Schools don't necessarily want to produce and release such numbers, and the Obama plan won't make them.

Dalmia also dismisses the *Washington Monthly*'s annual rankings for measuring only a school's social good, not its benefit to individual students. But this isn't fair to *WaMo.* These rankings consider social mobility, research and service (top honors go to Bryn Mawr, UC San Diego and Saint Paul College). Social mobility may be a political goal—as Dalmia characterizes it—but it's also a measure of how individual low-income students fare.

And this year, *WaMo* has added an additional ranking: the "Best Bang for the Buck Colleges," a useful list based on Pell Grant rates, graduation rates and graduates' student-loan defaults. Amherst tops this list, followed by CUNY Queens. (The Obama plan includes a similar idea.)

I've written before about why I admire *WaMo*'s approach to college rankings. They consider the common good; they focus on low-income students; they rightly value

service in ROTC (among other kinds). Some people find them lacking, or feel that any set of rankings is useless unless and until it can measure student learning first and foremost.

In any case, here's where there's a growing consensus: we really should just [ignore the *U.S. News* rankings](#). There may be many reasonable arguments about what makes a good college, but it definitely shouldn't come down to a mutual admiration society of administrators.